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REVIEWED BY *P. J. Hall* DATE *Dec 19/81*

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TO: The Secretary
FROM: NEA - Harold H. Saunders

The Afghan Coup

State 8400128

We know little about the motivation or nature of the rebel leaders, and the question of the coup group's control outside the capital is still open. The purpose of this memo is to give you a way of looking at the situation until we know more and to lay out the issues it poses for us.

Fragmentary evidence suggests that they may be leftist and/or strongly Islamic nationalist. The relative mix of these ingredients is unknown. Most importantly we do not know the extent, if any, of Soviet involvement. If the Afghanistan Communist Party is playing a key role, it is possible that the Soviets were informed of the coup in advance and chose neither to support it nor to veto it. The Soviets in the past years, however, have acted with restraint toward Afghanistan and it would not seem to be to their advantage to assert control of this important non-aligned country. The Afghans throughout their history have been characterized as fiercely independent and have successfully played a delicate balancing act between East and West.

Whatever the facts, we will have to deal with the probable perceptions of the Iranians and Pakistanis, as well as the US press and public, that the new regime is a little more than a Soviet proxy. Pakistan will be alarmed and its acute sense of insecurity further enhanced if they believe themselves to be virtually surrounded by Soviet-leaning regimes -- India and Afghanistan. The Shah will see this as confirmation of his "worse-case scenario" -- the encirclement of Iran by the Communists. The US press and public may portray the situation as a new "Horn of Africa". It is worth noting that the Kabul events will attract more than ordinary attention in the world, since a ministerial-level meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe is scheduled to meet in Kabul May 6-10.

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One immediate task is to share our information and our assessments with the Paks and the Iranians and try to dissuade any hasty moves on their part. Our Embassies' initial assessments are that neither will move under present conditions. Such moves might set off a chain-reaction in the area. We will also be closely watching the Afghan/Soviet border for signs of any Soviet troop movements.

In the next few days we will have to make decisions on the following matters.

1. Relations With A New Regime - We usually deal with new regimes that come to power through coups if they control the machinery of government and the countryside. The question of recognition does not arise and our recent practice is to avoid attributing significance to our dealings with a new regime. It is still too early to know whether or not the new government is in control. If there are public perceptions that the new regime is Communist, there may be political pressures to withhold recognition. The Soviets may very well extend recognition soon.

2. Safety of Americans - There are about 1,000 Americans in Kabul. There are no reported American casualties and the foreign community in Kabul has not been threatened. If heavy fighting resumes, we will have to consider whether or not to try an evacuation.

3. The Soviet Angle - There have already been speculative press reports describing this as a "communist coup." As mentioned above, it is still too early to know whether or not the Soviets were involved. But the public and Congress may perceive this as another Soviet victory and there may be pressures to do something about it.

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